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ABSTRACT

The first brief paper advocates the position that school-attending older children be used to teach health, hygiene, nutrition, and crafts to adult women and to conduct neighborhood-based literacy classes in rural communities in India. It is argued that the number of 10- to 14-year-old adolescents available for such a project would be above 60 million, that these literate students might also teach children not attending school, and that focusing on neighborhoods would avoid problems associated with faction-ridden women's clubs. A second, very brief paper, identifies three social strate among Indians residing in rural areas. The stratum most likely to benefit from social programs is indicated, and instructional strategies for educating the women of that stratum are mentioned. (RH)

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Child-to-Mother, a strategy based on children as vectors of taking science and technology to rural women

Science and Technology have taken great strides in the 20th century, but the impact of this development is still largely confined to the Western world; in the East, barring Japan, the impact of S and T is confined to the urban milieu and there also largely to the educated elite.

Our first hand experience with rural communities shows that new ideas in education, health and hygiene rarely touch approximately one-third of the population - the poorest of the poor rural people. Even the middle layer of the rural population comprising small farmers, petty shopkeepers and artisans have not been able to fully reap the benefits of governmental and other projects aiming at the uplift of the rural masses. One of the reasons responsible for this state of affairs is the vastness of the problem and paucity of resources, particularly of trained personnel.

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The child-to-child approach has been suggested as a way to provide an army of enthusiastic volunteers who can be employed to take new ideas in science and technology to the rural people, especially to the younger children.

I propose that we modify the concept of child-to-child a little and evolve a new strategy of child-to-mother.

More than 40 per cent of our population is within the age range birth-to-14 years and if one-third of this fraction is assumed to be in the age range 10-to-14 years, the actual number of these adolescents would be above 60 millions. By any calculation this human force can be counted in millions.

There are now many incentives for children of the weaker sections of society to go to school and many children from the middle socio-economic strata and some children even from the lowest stratum are enrolled in schools. It would be a good idea to influence parent behaviour through the agency of the older children in rural schools.

The older children in rural schools may be given training in health hygiene and nutrition and in crafts which can be practised by illiterate rural women. The children in turn, will take the ideas and techniques home to parents; they may even run informal neighbourhood classes for small groups.

The number of illiterates in our country is large and the number tends to grow rather than diminish. Why not use the training, talents and enthusiasm of the millions of school children in spreading literacy? It has been suggested to make it compulsory for college graduates to serve rural areas for specified period before degrees are awarded to them. Is it not worth a trial to make it compulsory for students of the final year in primary schools to teach reading and writing to, say, five illiterate adults? The scheme may envisage to cover ~~a~~ non-school going children also. The school-going children of the final year may include even non-school going children to fulfil their social obligation of teaching a certain number of illiterates.

Now about the neighbourhood classes. The social workers in rural areas usually use the agency of village Mahila Mandals (Women's Clubs) to contact the ~~a~~ women folk of the rural communities. Our limited experience shows that

even in relatively liberal Gujarat the village communities are fraction-ridden often on caste lines. It is therefore, difficult to draw women from all sections of a community to the centralised Mahila Mandal. One way to circumvent this difficulty is to organize neighbourhood classes. There is greater homogeneity in a neighbourhood and even in a mixed neighbourhood there is greater coherence compared to the community as a whole.

A neighbourhood class can more easily draw upon the neighbourhood resources. Child-teachers under the proposed child-to-mother approach will also find it easier to tackle smaller groups of more familiar adults.

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I - Realities of Rural Life

Majority (80 per cent) of our countrymen live in villages and it should not require elaborate arguments to convince anyone that unless the lot of this majority improves, we, as a nation, cannot progress.

Many Government and non-Government agencies are working towards the goal of rural uplift. Considering the time, effort and funds that have been spent for the rural uplift, the real achievements are not impressive. This is apparent when one visits a rural community that may be situated just a few kilometres away from a city.

Now to tackle any problem successfully one has to have a realistic picture of the situation, for mere pious intentions may not be enough; if we want our programmes to succeed the service we offer to the rural people must be need-based.

Today I wish to present before you a pictorial record of some aspects of rural life with the hope that this may help rural social workers to orientate their programmes properly.

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We have been working in a few rural communities not too far from Baroda which is a thriving university and industrial city. I have come to the conclusion that at least three strata should be recognized in rural communities

1. A very small minority of affluent farmers and traders;
2. About one-third of the population so poor and so much engrossed in eking out means to enable them just to exist; and

3. About 50 to 60 per cent of the people who are in between.

At the moment it seems to me that the affluent minority either does not need or does not care to heed to what we try to do to help the masses; and the poorest stratum is too poor even to utilize our services. It may require some bold steps on part of the Government to help this section of the population.

It is the middle layer - small farmers, petty traders and petty artisans - who can be helped by rural projects as they are structured at present.

Considering the complexity of the rural situation which is the result of many diverse factors including the caste system, I am of the opinion that neighbourhood classes may be adopted as an appropriate strategy to contact and influence the women of the middle layer. I also suggest that the vast reservoire of human energy in form of adolescent children should be harnessed to the task of helping the people to help themselves. I hope I shall have the benefit of an informal exchange of ideas with you all individually later.

Now, as you all know, the child-to-child approach is finding favour with social workers. I suggest that we should modify the approach a little and develop a child-to-mother approach.

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